

Pillage of cultural sites – how can Europe help to stop it?

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Deliberately destroying and pillaging archaeological sites and trafficking art objects in war zones amount to « cultural genocide » and should be classified as war crimes, argued speakers in a public hearing held by the European Parliament’s Culture and Education Committee on Monday afternoon. MEPs and experts reiterated the need for harmonised international legislation in this area.

MEPs argued that this type of threat demands a response and stronger cooperation among all international organisations. “With this meeting we have finally laid down the foundation for planning a European strategy to fight the destruction of cultural heritage by Isis/Daesh and limit illegal trade, thanks to International Criminal Court the representative who confirmed that there are the legal conditions to consider intentional destruction as a crime against humanity and the possibility of involving UN blue helmets in this area”, said committee chair Silvia Costa (S&D, IT).

“ICCROM and Interpol stressed the need for EU legislation on the import of cultural objects and to strengthen the Psyche database, together with a stronger coordination of international organizations such as Unesco and Icom PE as part of EU cultural diplomacy”, Ms Costa added.

Fighting the black market in cultural objects – a substantial source of funding for terrorism.

Recent cases of cultural pillage in historic areas of the Middle East, notably Syria and Iraq, by organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and the sheer volume of contraband art object sales revenue used to finance terrorism demand an urgent response, said MEPs.

The recent example of voluntary restitutions of art objects listed as having an illicit provenance could encourage European states to ratify existing national conventions quickly and do more to enforce this legislation, with tough sanctions against traffickers, said experts. They also proposed that the the EU should help to create “safe havens” for cultural objects and help to control the black market for them.

International cooperation urgently needed to prevent attacks on heritage

Experts from UNESCO, Interpol, the International Criminal Court, the universities of Siena and Geneva and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property all demonstrated that intervention instruments to prevent such acts exist and can be activated. Those working already and aiming to reduce pillage substantially in the longer run include a stolen art objects data base put on line by Interpol and directly accessible to the public, customs and police cooperation to identify and seize objects illegally imported or placed on the market, and training to enable experts to identify and list sites and cultural objects, including « rescue teams » in the event of wartime or national catastrophes.

All these activities are unfortunately severely limited by fragmented legislation and weak legal or political cooperation at international level, said the experts. It is also urgently necessary to step up cooperation, not only among states, but also among various international organisations, universities and other parties, said MEPS.

Press release

Possible EU rules?

The MEPs' calls will not go unanswered. European Commission representatives at the hearing confirmed that a study would soon be done on the trafficking of art objects on EU territory, focusing on imports, to ascertain the extent to which more detailed harmonised legislation is needed.

Further information

- Committee on Culture and Education: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/cult/home.html>
- Programme of the Hearing: https://polcms.secure.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/8f48e2c5-d9ce-40ec-b67e-7265f55b35a2/CULT_PH_Cultural%20heritage_Draft%20Programme_01-07-2015_16h32.pdf
- Catch up via Video On Demand (VOD) : <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/committees/search>

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